

# United In Community

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Date: 24 October 2021

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[ 0 : 00 ] On the night of his betrayal, our Lord Jesus prayed these words. The glory that you have given me, I have given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one, I in them, and you in me, that they may be perfectly one, so that the world may know that you have sent me.

And love them, even as you have loved me. Our Lord's priority in prayer was the unity of his people in practice.

Let me say that again. Our Lord's priority in prayer was our unity in practice. He prayed that we as his disciples would be one.

And the next day he died that we as his disciples would become one. Over the next few Sunday evenings, I want us to explore the vital importance of Christian unity.

Not just the idea of unity, but its practice. Because it's one thing to talk about unity. It's another thing to practice unity.

[ 1 : 21 ] Referring back to Jesus' prayer. We do so in the first instance because if unity was a priority to Jesus, it should be for us also.

But because secondly, in his prayer, Jesus tied the oneness of our unity together with the fruitfulness of our mission as Christians. It's as the world sees our unity in practice.

It understands the uniqueness of Jesus and the effectiveness of the gospel. This evening I want to consider with you what it means to practice unity in community.

To lay the groundwork for how we are to think and act toward each other if we are to pursue the blessings of God's fruitfulness in our fellowship.

In Ephesians 4 verses 1-6, the Apostle Paul teaches us how as Christians who live together in community one with the other, we can be eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

[ 2 : 33 ] Now the practice of Christian unity is of vital importance if we are to be fruitful in our obedience to Jesus and our mission for Jesus.

Let me suggest that we can understand the topic of unity in community from Ephesians 4 verses 1-6 in three stages. The reality of unity in community.

The value of unity in community. The practice of unity in community. First of all, the reality of unity in community.

The reality of unity in community. The reality of unity in community. Today, this 24th day of October 2021 represents a rather unique occasion when two congregations do not split from one another, but unite with one another.

It's the first day Partic Free Church and Glasgow City Free Church are worshipping together. It's going to take us a while to get to know one another. But from the very beginning, I want to establish something among us.

[ 3 : 42 ] To get something written down in black and whites in our hearts. There is no them and us here. The them being Glasgow City and the us being Partic or vice versa.

There is only one big us. There aren't two groups of Christians worshipping together here today. There is just one.

Let's do everything we can to get away from the mindset of them and us. Whoever we should choose them to be and us to be. Let's focus on what makes us one, not what makes us different. I'm not saying that because it's my dream that one day we shall be one. But because before God, theologically, we are already one.

And have always been one. You know that Paul wrote the book of Ephesians while in prison. He begins chapter 4 with the words, I therefore a prisoner of the Lord.

[ 4 : 44 ] He's in chains for his faith in Christ and his faithful preaching of the gospel. In what is an inspired play on words? In verse 3 he says of us, We are to be eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

Eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. Now the word prisoner in verse 1 and the word bond in verse 3 might sound different in the English language, but in the original Greek language, the language in which Paul was writing, they're the same word.

Be eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the chains of peace, he says. Paul's writing this letter while stuck in prison. The reality is that although those to whom he is writing are not stuck in prison, they are chained to one another.

I'm afraid that as Christians, we are stuck to and with each other. You're stuck with me and I'm stuck with you. We are chained to one another.

This truth about unity in community is reinforced by how Paul speaks about it. He says, maintain it. It's not something you don't have to which you must attain.

[ 6 : 10 ] It's something that God has already given you which you are to maintain. This is the reality of unity in community. It isn't something to which we attain as much as something which we must maintain.

Now we'll come back to that word maintain later in the sermon. But from Paul's perspective here in Ephesians chapter 4, there is no them and us in the church of Jesus Christ.

There is just one big us. Before God, we are one and always have been one. But perhaps you need more persuading.

After all, isn't it true that for generations, free church congregations have viewed one another with suspicions? Perhaps you need more persuading that there is no them and us.

There is just only one big us. Well, consider what Paul says in verses 4 through 6. There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father over all, who is over all and through all and in all.

[ 7 : 36 ] What's Paul getting at by piling all these ones on top of each other? Let's draw this back down into the context of this being the first day that Partick Free Church and Glasgow City Free Church are worshipping together.

Now think in your mind of one of the believers from Partick Free Church, Archie McInnes, who stood here this morning and welcomed us. And then also think in your mind of one of the Christians from Glasgow City Free Church, Walter, who stood here and reciprocated.

Tell me, does Jesus have more than one body such that these two Christians belong to different bodies of Christ? Are Archie and Walter filled with a different kind of Holy Spirit from each other? Do they cling to different hopes of salvation from each other? Do they worship the same Lord? Do they believe the same faith?

Do they have the same trust in Christ? Were they baptized into the name of a different Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Are they people of a different God?

[ 8 : 52 ] Do they have the same Heavenly Father? When you bring it down into the context of Glasgow City and Partick worshipping together, there's no them and us.

There's only one big us. If we are Christians, then we are one us. Pure and simple. That's what Paul's saying. There never was an us and them, even before we engaged in this arrangement. There never was. One body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, one Father.

It was always wrong for free church congregations to view each other with suspicion, because we were always one in Christ.

This was not the dream. This was the reality. There is no other Jesus than the one who saves people from Partick and the one who saves people from Glasgow City.

[ 9 : 56 ] And so on the basis of apostolic teaching in Ephesians 4, again I say we must not entertain for one second that there is any such thing as them and us.

There is only one big us. Today, 24th of October 2021, might represent the first day that Partick and Glasgow City are physically worshipping together.

But the truth is that we have always, and always have been, one in Christ. This is the reality of unity in community.

Second, the value of unity in community. The value of unity in community.

Little things, little words mean big things in the Bible. Little words mean big things in the Bible. Paul begins Ephesians 4, verse 1, by saying, I, therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you.

[ 11 : 07 ] This little word I want to draw your attention to in verse 1 is the conjunctive adverb, therefore. Therefore.

Whenever you see the word, therefore, in the text, ask yourself the question, what is it there for? What is it there for? It usually refers to what has gone before.

Paul is saying what he's saying, now on the basis of, or as a consequence, of what he has said previously. And so the Apostle Paul is urging us to maintain unity with each other on the basis of what he's just said.

In this case, as a consequence of what he's prayed for in Ephesians 3, verses 14 through 21. And he begins that section, that prayer with the words, for this reason, I bow my knees before the Father.

And then he continues to pray. And then he, chapter 4, verse 1, he refers back to all he's prayed for by using the word, therefore.

[ 12 : 20 ] So as you read through Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3, verses 14 through 21, we begin to realize that he's holding up for us the benefits, the advantages, and the value of maintaining the bond of unity, the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

If we should break unity, we will forfeit these benefits. If we guard our unity, we shall experience these benefits. Let me say that again with reference to the prayer of Paul in Ephesians 3, verses 14 through 21.

If we break unity with each other, then we shall forfeit these blessings. If we guard unity with each other, then we shall experience these blessings in ever-increasing measure.

So what are these benefits which become ours and we can experience for ourselves as one body in Christ, we carefully guard and maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There are so many from the prayer we could mention. There's strength, there's understanding, there's knowledge, and so on. But the three I want to focus on very briefly are the indwelling Christ, the fullness of God, and the glory of God.

[ 13 : 48 ] we forfeit all these benefits as a church and as individual Christians when we fail to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

the first blessing of unity is that Christ shall dwell in our hearts through faith. Christ shall dwell in our hearts through faith.

Chapter 3, verse 17. Isn't that something we want for our fellowship this big one us? If Christ is central to us, if he's the vine and we're the branches as we saw this morning, then surely as a church, a church without a Christ is a contradiction in terms.

Let me remind you of a vital aspect of Jesus' high priestly prayer from our introduction. That they may be one even as we are one, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, I in them, you in me, that the world may know that you sent me and love them even as you love me.

How shall the world know that Christ is in us and that he was sent from God unless we maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?

[ 15 : 16 ] If we want people who come in to our church to be struck by the presence of Christ and our worship and our fellowship, then we need to make every effort to maintain our unity.

If we want Christ to dwell in our hearts, both as one church and as individual Christians, we need to preserve that unity. Over the years, I've met many contentious and divisive Christians, as I'm sure you have as well, but never did any one of them impress me as enjoying a close and intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.

They gave no evidence whatever that Christ was dwelling in their hearts. the second benefit of unity is that we shall be filled with all the fullness of God.

We shall be filled with all the fullness of God. Chapter 3, verse 19. Again, isn't this something we want for our fellowship here? That as individual Christians and as the one big us, we are filled to all the fullness of God.

Now, you'll know that filled is one of Paul's catchphrases. For example, filled with the Spirit. But in this case, Paul is making a truly remarkable statement.

[ 16 : 46 ] Inasmuch as we maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, he seems to be saying, we grow toward perfection just as God himself is perfect.

He's not saying we'll ever reach that ultimate state of perfection. Well, not until heaven anyway. But he is saying that to the extent we maintain our unity with each other, we are growing toward perfection.

We are becoming an embassy of heaven on earth. Isn't that what the church ought to be? Not a pathetic imitation of the world around us with all its arguments and wars, but a truly counter-cultural fellowship of love and peace and harmony.

You know, we stand to forfeit that perfection if we fail to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We lose the fullness of God among us.

And then third, the third benefit of unity is that it tends toward God's glory in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations.

[ 18 : 08 ] It tends toward the glory of God. Is that not our primary purpose as individual Christians and as one church in Christ?

Christ. We all know the answer to that first catechism question earlier. What is man's primary purpose? Man's primary purpose is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

God has brought great glory as his people lay aside whatever petty differences they have and as one focus on Christ and his gospel. God is not glorified in the divisions and splits among churches and peoples.

He is not glorified in the heart of one Christian who is bitter and unforgiving toward another Christian. But when churches are reconciled and joined, when one Christian is reconciled and restored to fellowship with another Christian through the reconciling power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it brings God glory.

This is the value of unity and community. unity, that which we shall forfeit if we fail to maintain our oneness in Christ. We shall lose the glory of God.

[ 19 : 30 ] Who would have ever thought that therefore in Ephesians 4.1 could mean so much? Who would have ever thought that it would add so much value to the preciousness of our unity in Christ?

Tell me, who in their right mind as a Christian would ever want to forfeit these blessings for Christ to dwell in us, to be filled to all the fullness of God, to give God the glory He's due?

Surely not us. This is the value of unity in community. unity in community.

The practice of unity in community. This is a reality. This is not an abstract idea. It is not a perfect ideal.

Unity in community is vital if we are to experience all the benefits of Christian living. But in practice, unity in community is easily broken.

[ 20 : 43 ] Like a bird in the undergrowth, it's easily startled by raised voices or by noisy disturbances. It's startled.

It's broken. It flies away. All the more reason Paul writes that we are to be eager to maintain unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

Over the years, far too many Christians from our own tradition have been eager to break the unity of the spirit. The startled, that frightened bird with their raised voices and their disturbances by angry outbursts, behind the back slander, underhanded manipulations and general grumpiness.

They did it, so they said, in the name of truth. But in reality, all they achieved was to break the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

Great was their foolishness and even greater shall be their judgment. we are to be eager to maintain unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

[ 22 : 01 ] Now, these are very easy words to say, but difficult things to do. After all, we've all been hurt in the church. One of Glasgow City's elders, who for most of his life was at the top of his profession, has often said to me that over the years, he has lost more sleep over arguments in the church than ever he did over disagreements with his professional colleagues.

As for me personally, and I'm not unique in this, I'm just like every other minister in the Free Church of Scotland, I have been miscalled, my integrity called into question, I've been the subject of angry letters, I've been called a receiver, I've been betrayed, I've been the subject of baseless rumours, etc, etc, etc, as has every minister of the gospel, it goes with the job.

And it's really easy for all of us to become cynical and disillusioned, to give up and to leave because things aren't being done the way you want them to, or the way that you're used to them being done, or you yourself are struggling in your relationship with another Christian in the church, but through it all, through the blinding pain of being struck down again and again by disappointments, we get back

up, and we strain toward this goal of maintaining the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. When you say to me, how is this unity achievable? How can we maintain it? in verse 2, Paul tells us, with all gentleness and humility, with patience bearing with one another in love. With all humility and gentleness, with patience bearing with one another in love, this is how we shall maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

[ 24 : 04 ] know what is humility better modeled than in Jesus Christ himself, the Jesus of Philippians 2 who became our servant. Let me read you Paul's expansion of what it means to be humble from Philippians 2.

Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but to the interests of others.

We maintain unity by counting others more significant than ourselves, by looking out for their interests, by refusing to pretend that we're more important than anyone else in how we act, how we speak, and how we think.

The Scottish Presbyterianism and gentleness aren't often words used in the same sentence.

People perhaps view us as being fiery, judgmental, unforgiving, harsh.

How different from the Christ who said of himself that he is gentle and lowly. Christ so gentle with us in all our weaknesses and failures, so gently persuading us, so gently changing us, refusing to give up on us, persisting with us so gently.

[ 25 : 32 ] If we would maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, we will be like Christ in our gentleness. There are many weak among us.

all of us are weak in our own unique ways. How shall we respond to one another's weaknesses? With fierce criticism and unreserved judgmentalism?

Or with gentleness? Patience takes the long view of things. A hundred meter sprinter doesn't need altogether much patience, but a marathon runner does.

He needs stamina, he needs endurance, he needs to focus on a finish line that he can't see because it's so far in the distance. As Christians who live in community with each other, we need to be patient with each other.

Not one of us is the finished article, not one. It is so easy to fall out with each other as our rough edges meet the rough edges in another person.

[ 26 : 42 ] What we need is the patience that only God can give us, that fruit of the spirit which yields a view of the long game. Impatience leads to arguments.

Impatience leads to division. Be patient with each other even as God is patient with us. And then lastly, bear with one another in love.

Bear with one another in love. Ah, this is hard. This is really hard. We have a dog called Lucy. And when we're trying to clip her toenails, she does everything she can, short of biting us and sometimes she tries, to wriggle free of our grasp.

The process of living in unity, in community, means that there are times when we bite each other, hurt each other, most of the time unintentionally, but sometimes, sometimes, unfortunately, we know exactly what we're doing.

Baiting with one another in love sometimes means clinging onto each other for dear life, even when that other person's claws are out unscratching us.

[ 27 : 58 ] Many ministers I know have deep mental and spiritual scars from having clung for dear life to a hurting Christian who is lashing out at them. Perhaps you too carry similar scars.

And when you're being scratched by another Christian, it's only too easy to throw up your hands and say, I can't be bothered anymore. It hurts too much to be here. I'm giving up on this fellowship. But love means never giving up on each other. It means always bothering with each other. It means putting up with the hurt we cause each other.

Always remembering that we stand to lose far more by walking away, by biting back, by losing patience, than ever we gain.

If our unity was Jesus' highest priority in prayer, it must also be ours, us his disciples.

[ 28 : 58 ] It's a precious reality, but it's hard to maintain. It's really hard. See when you get home this evening, do me a favor.

Look in the mirror. Think of this gathering here, this evening and this morning and say to yourself, there may be someone in our fellowship who will break that unity and so forfeit all the blessings of Christ to us.

